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# Freedom and Foreclosure: Intimate Consequences for Asexual Identities

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This paper considers the intersections between identity and intimate practices for asexual people. Drawing upon findings from a project exploring asexual lives we argue that asexual identification produced consequences for intimate lives in the form of either freedom or foreclosure. Eight perceptions of increased freedom or foreclosure in personal life will be discussed. Using Symbolic Interactionist theory we suggest that while these attitudes were the result of either introspection or negotiation. In highlight this, we argue they all draw upon conceptions of significant others and what is considered acceptable in intimate relationships. We conclude by highlighting how such a position requires us to be aware of the relational elements of intimate lives.

## *Introduction*

Asexuality is a social mode of being, through which those so identified encounter, understand and relate to other people. As such, it can be studied from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective. As we shall argue in this paper, such a perspective complements the existing, somewhat individualistic literature by emphasising themes of meaning-making, negotiation and interactional contingency. To illustrate this, we shall draw upon findings from a two-year project that focused on two interrelated research questions: ‘How do individuals form an asexual identity?’ and ‘How is intimacy constructed and maintained in relationships where one, or all, of the principles identifies as asexual?’ Research findings that consider asexual identities and asexual intimacies *separately* can be found elsewhere (Scott et al. 2016, Dawson et al. 2016). Instead this paper concerns the interrelation between and intersection of asexual identities and intimacies, including the different outcomes this produced. More specifically, this paper considers the different ways in which asexual people in our study saw their identity as shaping their personal lives and relations with others. It explores how these participants processed and/or reflected on the intersections between their asexual identity and intimacy (either introspectively or through negotiation with others). Finally, it considers the

consequences of asexual identities on perceived opportunities – the themes of foreclosure and freedom – upon one’s intimate relationships and experiences. As we shall discuss in the conclusion, such findings demonstrate the value of a relational approach, such as Symbolic Interactionism, to understanding personal life (Smart 2007, Jackson and Scott 2010).

### *Asexuality*

AVEN (the Asexual Visibility and Education Network) defines an asexual person as someone who does not experience sexual attraction. It then goes on to suggest that ‘unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are’ (AVEN 2016). This definition of asexuality has been central to the development of a movement around asexual visibility. As online groups like AVEN, together with a wider asexual network, grew a complex lexicon developed covering diverse forms of asexual identity. In particular, greater emphasis came to be placed on the distinction between sexual desire and romantic attraction. These are separate feelings which can interact in multiple ways. This has led to the birth of more specific forms of identification around: attitude to sex (e.g. repulsed, averse), orientations to attraction (aromantic, grey-a, demi-sexual) and to the genders connected to those attractions (poly, pan, homo, hetero, etc.). These categories can then intersect so one can identify as, to offer three examples from a wide selection, sex-repulsed aromantic; grey-a heteroromantic; and asexual polyromantic. These describe, respectively, someone with no sexual desire or romantic attraction; someone with limited sexual desire alongside romantic attraction to the opposite gender; and someone with no sexual desire but romantic attraction to all genders. This has led some to argue that asexuality should be thought of as a ‘meta-category’ which contains large amounts of internal diversity (Chasin 2011). However, little has been said about how these varied ways of privately experiencing asexuality affect social relationships and interaction at the micro level, through the routine practices and situational encounters of everyday life. We suggest that a Symbolic Interactionist approach can elucidate these interpersonal processes through which the meaning of asexuality is co-defined, negotiated and symbolically communicated (Scott and Dawson 2015). This in turn can help us to understand how asexual people’s self-identities both shape and are shaped by experiences with significant others (Mead 1934), especially in the context of their personal and intimate lives.

### *Bridging intimacy and identity*

Relationality, in both macro and micro terms, provides us with a theoretical bridge between asexual intimacies and identities. In macro terms, ‘relationality’ is a concept that assumes that people live within intentional, thoughtful networks of others which they can maintain, actively sustain or allow to atrophy. In micro terms, the importance of ‘relationality’, embedded in Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969), asks us to consider identity as more than simply an internally directed quest of self-discovery (although this is important) but rather emerges from the ‘mundane social interaction through which each of us makes sense of our own and others’ identity (Jackson and Scott 2010:91). To do this we have to engage in a process of identifying with, and perhaps differentiating ourselves from, a generalised other who is seen to represent the expectations of the ‘community’ of which we are part (Mead 1934). By identifying with other groups – whether this be a sexual orientation, gender identity or professional grouping – we make sense at an individual level of our socially mediated identity (Williams 2000). This social process may involve negotiating with others the format of intimate relationships, particularly in terms of navigating the socially mandated scripts for such relationships (Gagnon and Simon 1973). It is this realisation which has led researchers to advocate a relational approach to the sociology of intimacy and personal life (Smart 2007). Consequently, intimacy shares an interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship with identity; the sense of self we get or do not get in close relationships matters to how both partners see their selves (Sanger 2010). A sexual orientation therefore, being partly defined by how we relate to intimate others, has relational elements which will help shape the forms of intimacy we wish to engage in.

While researchers have discussed the relation of identity and intimate practices for other non-normative sexualities (e.g. Weeks 2001) there has been little discussion of this for asexual people. This can partly be explained by the fact that ‘asexuality’ as a term used to describe a human sexual orientation has only been available since the early 2000s, with social scientific research first emerging as late as 2008 (Scherrer 2008, Carrigan 2015). In the social sciences, there has been a welcome move away from the classification and categorisation of asexual ‘types’ to a focus on asexual identity. One of the earliest studies here, from Scherrer (2008), focused on how asexual people have to negotiate their own feelings of desire along with the various categories available to them in order to come to an identity. It was these dual negotiations which meant that categories of identification could take on complex forms, as in

the story of Dora, who identified as ‘aromantic asexual, possibly shading to hypo-hetero-romantic hypo-sexual (it’s a confusing issue)’ (Scherrer 2008:632).

Similar arguments are made in Carrigan’s work (2011, 2012). He highlights that while identification as asexual requires an initial recognition of difference from non-asexual people, this does not override the different identities available within asexuality. In this sense, it is difficult to speak of an ‘asexual community’ without seeing it as one defined by difference (Carrigan 2011). What does unite asexual people is the need to negotiate the ‘sexual assumption’. This can lead to the redefinition of relationships such as ‘friend’ and ‘partner’; the boundaries between these become ‘decidedly fuzzier’ (Carrigan 2012:15). As others have pointed out (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014), this is impacted by the differing relationships towards sex found among asexual people. Some may be willing to engage in sex to please their partner, or out of curiosity, whereas others may be unwilling.

These studies have been central to establishing the social scientific field of asexuality studies and to increasing our awareness of the key elements of asexual identification. However, as Carrigan (2015) has argued, more work on forms of relationships and intimacy is required. It is to this call that this paper partly responds, and, in doing so, differentiates itself from the above approaches, creating a more pluralistic and triangulated base from which to understand asexual intimacies and identities. In taking a Symbolic Interactionist approach, we focus on the micro-social level of analysis, emphasising participants’ accounts of everyday encounters, interactions and relations with significant others of various kinds. We consider asexual identities as embedded and emergent from these social relationships, rather than being either privately individual or publicly political issues. Following Jackson and Scott (2010), we argue that Symbolic Interactionism can offer a different way of seeing asexuality as contingent and negotiated, in relation to significant others, symbolic objects and cultural discourses. This can be observed through participants’ accounts of the everyday ‘practices of intimacy’ (Jamieson 1998) that recur throughout their personal lives. Through this lens of relationality, therefore, we argue that identity and intimacy are intertwined. In the following discussion, we explore the dynamic, mobile interrelationship between the two, and its many potential consequences for asexual lives. In doing so, we can explore the myriad ways in which the ‘sexual assumption’ Carrigan (2012) speaks of is experienced, and the negotiations it engenders.

### *Methods and Sample*

Following a Symbolic Interactionist approach, we sought to understand how asexual identities were negotiated through interaction (Scott 2015). Methodologically, we could only access this indirectly, through recollections and accounts, but such narrative data are valuable in elucidating processes of reflective, biographical identity work (Snow and Anderson 1983). We sought to gather these ‘stories of the self’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) from two temporal perspectives: a short-term focus on immediate events (through diary writing) and a longer-term narrative of retrospection (through interview accounts). Elsewhere (McDonnell et al. 2016), we have discussed the consequences of this methodological triangulation.

As noted by Carrigan (2011), much of the literature on asexuality has relied primarily upon internet sampling, notably from AVEN. This has led to two concerns. Firstly, AVEN users are likely to have a particular way of identifying (or not identifying) with, and discussing, asexuality. Secondly, such a sample is often demographically biased towards young, middle class, female people. To rectify this, we sought a broad and inclusive net for our sample; this included recruiting through AVEN, along with other online spaces, such as Tumblr, Twitter and a Huffington Post article. Additionally, we sought to recruit via local LGBTQ groups and by the use of flyers posted locally. Overall we recruited 50 participants.

In one way we did achieve our broad and inclusive sample. We framed our recruitment material in such a way as to, hopefully, attract participants who identified with asexuality, felt the term described them in some way, and/or those who experienced little or no sexual desire or attraction. This gave some diversity in that the sample included people with a myriad set of self-definitions and experiences of intimacy. These participants engaged in diverse behaviours (including sex with others and fetishes) with varied romantic desires towards gendered and non-gendered others.

However, the demographics of our sample were similar to other solely internet/AVEN based samples, such as Scherrer’s (2008). For example, 76% of our sample was under 29 years old, 66% were female, 76% came from either the UK or the US, and 72% were currently single. Given the emergent nature of asexual identity, and the way in which English-language

websites have been the main means of collective organisation, it is likely that these skews of the sample will emerge in all studies on the topic.

Our participants were asked to take part in two activities. Firstly, all 50 took part in a biographical in-depth interview focusing on the life events, experiences and interactions around asexuality. The goal here was to gain some understanding not just of how people had initially come to think of themselves as asexual, but how this has changed over time. In particular, we were interested, following our Symbolic Interactionist approach, in how ‘significant others’ (Mead 1934) had influenced people’s forms of identification. Secondly, 27 of the participants agreed to complete diaries for two weeks. Each day of the diary had three prompts focussing on everyday intimate encounters, awareness of asexuality and difficult negotiations around intimacy. In the discussion below, we draw upon data from both the diaries and interviews.

The data analysis strategy for the project was a bottom-up approach (within boundaries set up by the research questions and their focus on asexual identification and practices of intimacy). Here we report on a theme that emerged concerning the intersections of intimacy and identity<sup>1</sup>. In particular, our focus is on what is happening in those intersections, especially how our participants adopted certain attitudes as ongoing resolutions to the challenges they faced.

### *Findings*

In what follows we present the ways in which foreclosure and freedom in personal life (as consequences of the interrelation between asexual identities and intimacies) manifested in participants’ stories. From our data analysis, it became apparent that these themes were operating within the dynamic (inter) relationship between identity and intimacy. Asexuality was seen either to foreclose certain paths of intimacy, or, conversely, to give the freedom to pursue new intimate practices. These ongoing consequences (i.e. foreclosure or freedom) of the interrelation between asexual identities and intimacies, could manifest as ways of thinking and/or ways of acting. Sometimes the links drawn were contemporaneous (at least in the stories produced) while for others they were more abstract (‘given I am asexual, this is how things will be...’). Some participants described more introspective, internally directed ways of managing the relationship between their identity and intimate lives, whereas others took a more outward-looking, negotiated and articulated-to-others approach. However, as we

shall see, even the former, introspective resolutions involved *imagined* or *anticipated* negotiations with a generalised other(s) from whom one was seen to differ. In all participants' accounts, therefore, asexuality was understood relationally, as emerging from encounters at the micro-level.

### **Foreclosure 1 (introspective): *the low chances of finding a partner***

Some of our participants saw their asexuality as closing down the possibility for a romantic/intimate partner. However, this was justified in different ways. For example, some participants adopted a fatalistic attitude that, despite their best efforts to find them, such an ideal partner – an 'ACE soulmate' (Maisie) – did not exist. Alternatively, some participants believed that such persons might exist, but that they would be too difficult to find. This implied the imagination of a hypothetical partner as a symbolic object (Blumer 1969) based on perfect similarity, which rendered them unobtainable. The fatalistic attitude this engendered is suggested by Lyla:

*So finding someone who's ridiculously intelligent and charismatic and has loads of integrity, and is their own person and who also likes me, and who's not super interested in sex...that narrows it down quite a bit. (Lyla, grey-asexual, 26)*

Lyla expresses a probability-reasoned argument which rests on the idea of low prevalence of asexuality making the chances of finding a compatible asexual partner unlikely. This view may have been influenced by Bogaert's (2004) estimation that 1% of people are asexual, which has been cited regularly within the asexual community and mass media. If one uses this as a working assumption for the prevalence of asexual people it would seem to limit one's chances (even before getting to the question of whether they will be 'intelligent and charismatic' and have 'loads of integrity').

However, it also indicates the aforementioned relational elements of asexual identity. Lyla, by describing herself as someone who is not interested in sex, engages in a comparison with a generalised other (Mead 1934) who is viewed as predominantly sexual. This means that foreclosure can happen via the assumption that non-asexual people would find it difficult to either abstain from sex or be in a relationship with someone to whom sex was relatively



unimportant. However, as we shall see below, some of our participants were able to engage in exactly those negotiations with non-asexual people.

What is significant here however is that these comparisons always have to take place in light of dominant cultural scripts of what a ‘romantic relationship’ is seen to be. Unlike other non-normative sexualities in which both the presence of sex and the prominence of the categories allow individuals to engage in ‘experiments in living’ to develop new scripts (Weeks et al. 2001), this is not seen as available to asexual people. Such a feeling is indicated in the story of Immy:

*I pretty much just back out...I like to communicate, you know, but when I know that the communication will be more harmful or confusing, or disjointed, then just a very graceful exit...I've never felt like I've been in a position where I could just come out and say that without getting the repercussion of people saying, you know, what's wrong with you? (Immy, heteromantic-asexual, 21)*

As this quotation indicates, Immy was reluctant to come out about her asexuality, assuming that others would not understand. As a result, she developed strategies to deal with this by retreating from romantic opportunities. In effect, her sexual orientation felt like a stigma, which, in being potentially ‘discreditable’, had to be hidden, so that she could ‘pass’ as otherwise (Goffman 1963). Here, Immy oriented her action towards an imagined audience, who are anticipated to be discriminatory; thus her asexuality was relationally defined as problematic. Immy’s private, individual needs were subsumed beneath this more pragmatic, interactional dilemma, and so remained unvoiced and socially inconsequential.

**Foreclosure 2 (introspective): *the awareness of barriers to forming close friendships due to differing priorities and experiences***

Of course, romantic relationships are just one form of intimate relationship. Our data also showed some foreclosure of friendships due to the assumption that others would have different priorities and experiences, making the shared understanding of friendship difficult to achieve. This is expressed in the stories of Lisa and Deena:

*There was this underlying thing of actually I'm not even a proper human being. It sort of made things worse and it meant that I couldn't talk about stuff with people who might have been able to help because they wouldn't have understood about why it was so important...generally it was related to work issues and I think for most people fundamentally the most important thing in their lives was their friends and their family (Lisa, aromantic asexual, 39)*

*Because whether people realize it or not every intimate conversation with a girlfriend, with a, you know, it all goes ultimately to some sort of sexual discussion. And when you don't have a complete foundation there, you can commiserate, but it's never real...so you fake. You know, you create; you let people think that there's been a bad relationship (Deena, 'me', 56)*

For Lisa and Deena, the sense of feeling different in such a central way pervades all aspects of self-identity. These participants thought of themselves as being inherently different; as Lisa poignantly says here, 'not human'. These show the two ways in which identity can occur via dissociation from others (Skeggs 2005). Firstly, one's self-identity can shape what we think we can or cannot do and therefore the strategies we adopt. In this case, the lack of experience of sexual intimacy is foundational to Deena's account – which she feels means that she cannot fully participate in her friendships. Consequently, Deena practiced faking with her female friends – she internalised the cultural script and, much like Immy, developed a way of 'passing' to hide what she believed was the discreditable stigma of her lack of sexual experience. She used this 'cover story' as a strategy of information control for the purposes of dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman 1959, 1963). Secondly, interactions and relations affect self-identity: being unable to relate to others about something that is so important to her made Lisa feel excluded and alienated. This inevitably affected her sense of self and reinforced the feelings of difference; of 'not being a proper human being'. Therefore, here we see the ways in which the cultural 'sexual assumption' (Carrigan 2012) can lead to forms of exclusion for those who do not fit within it. The result, for both Lisa and Deena, is the foreclosing of opportunities for friendships.

**Foreclosure 3 (negotiated): *relationships end due to asexual people not wanting to engage in (regular) sex***

Whereas the previous two cases dealt with internally determined attitudes of foreclosure, the following two deal with forms of foreclosure which can occur via the negotiation of intimate relationships. The first instance deals with an attitude developed once someone entered a romantic relationship:

*I did have a girlfriend recently...And, you know, every once in a while we had sex, but she had thought that, you know my asexuality would, you know, go away if, you know, I had enough sex...I basically gave her permission to go and see other guys if she wanted to have sex, and she didn't really want to do that, so we had to fold it up. (Ed, hetero-romantic, pan-demi-romantic, flexible asexual, 45)*

Ed's story was not unique: some of our participants had similar experiences where an unwillingness to have sex led to the ending of a relationship. Furthermore, this was also a fear for our participants who were not in, but wanted to be in, a relationship. However, as we will also discuss further below, this could also lead to alternative forms of relationships.

What Ed's story tells us is how scripts of the intimate romantic relationship assume a sexual component. The cultural 'framing' of relationships (Morgan 2011) suggests that while disclosing intimacy (Jamieson 1998) is central to the establishment of such a relationship, what distinguishes a 'romantic' relationship from a friendship is partly the presence of sex. As we have discussed elsewhere, it is these 'boundaries' of intimacy which asexual people have to negotiate within (Dawson et al. 2016). However, this relies upon both partners being willing to negotiate in order to make the dramaturgical 'team' (Goffman 1959) of the relationship survive. They are contingent on the trust, tact and 'dramaturgical loyalty' of fellow actors to protect the collective 'face' of the relationship (Goffman, *ibid*; Scott and Dawson 2015). In this case, Ed attempted to maintain the romantic intimacy of the relationship by outsourcing the sexual element. However, his girlfriend rejected this, presumably due to the expectation that sexual intimacy is integrated within the romantic intimacy produced by the exclusive insularity of the relationship (Simmel 1950). In this sense, Ed's story of attempted negotiation forecloses the potential of a relationship, unlike other alternative arrangements we discuss below.

**Foreclosure 4 (negotiated): *opportunities for non-sexual closeness in friendships are closed down due to the fear of 'something more'***

The final form of foreclosure returns us to friendships and again concerns the boundaries of intimacy. Friendships were especially significant relationships for many of our participants. This may be due not only to the frequently noted forms of intimacy and ‘hidden solidarities’ (Spencer and Pahl 2005) such relationships are said to engender, but also to the aforementioned forms of foreclosure towards romantic relationships, which might make friendships particularly significant for asexual people. Unfortunately, sometimes one’s asexuality, and the fear of friends wanting something ‘more’, was seen to impact the possibilities of friendship:

*I just want friends and I really do, I really, really do want friends that, I do enjoy talking to people that’s why I said my friends are important to me and I get enough from that. I don’t want somebody to cuddle and hold and be around physically but I can understand the desire for it. But I do want people to talk to and I do want to have engaging conversations and...That is the story of my life I’ll meet people, boys and girls, and they’ll be interesting and wonderful people and I’ll really want to spend time with them and want to be their friend and I’ll want to have conversation and I want to hang out with them but at the back of my brain there’s always this, I just want a friend, please don’t misunderstand me, please don’t take it further, please don’t ruin it. (Josie, mostly asexual, 25)*

While some participants were able to negotiate the forms of friendships they sought, Josie explains how difficult it can be to establish a friendship when dealing with others’ romantic intentions. As with any interpersonal encounter, the meanings of symbolic communication must be delicately negotiated between both parties, with the potential for misinterpretation (Blumer 1969). In this case, the fear of interaction partners reading ‘something more’ into a gesture means that sometimes not engaging is the safer option.

In this sense, while friendships can be seen as the contemporary ‘ideal relationship’ (Spencer and Pahl 2005) we should not overlook the possibility for ‘difficult friendships’, which can induce feelings of guilt and ontological insecurity (Smart et al. 2012). Josie’s sense of identity here both informed and was informed by her needs and preferences for intimacy. However, having these interactions with significant others – and managing their reactions – affected her sense of self, creating the guilt and ontological insecurity that comes with difficult friendships. As with all the forms of foreclosure mentioned, it is significant how

resolutions are made with regard to real or imagined significant others. Such others are positioned either as not understanding or people whom one wishes not to hurt.

Having discussed four attitudes of foreclosure, we now turn to four ways in which asexual identity led to forms of freedom in intimate relationships. One of these emerged through introspection, and three through negotiation.

**Freedom 1 (negotiated): *developing an asexual identity allows an individual to maintain their bodily boundaries and intimate preferences***

The first form of freedom concerned the ability to be clear about one's desires and boundaries, as suggested by Catherine:

*It was really weird because he'd been talking about pushing it further to beyond kissing, and you know, further steps of physical intimacy, and that had already been something that I was like, 'Oh yeah, no' And then when I started to realize that I was probably, you know, asexual, I said, 'You know, actually this isn't working for me. There are lines that I'm not going to cross. I'm just figuring out that I'm not what I thought I was. I don't want to step over any boundaries because I don't know where my boundaries are at the minute' (Catherine, polyromantic, 20)*

Here again we see the interdependency of identity and intimacy: having a strong sense of oneself as being asexual and not wanting certain kinds of contact leads to asserting these wishes in relationships, consequently managing the boundaries between self and others. Discovering an identity gives a clear path of action for intimate relationships and, significantly, a vocabulary with which to express such desires. While, as we have suggested above, the 'scripts' for a romantic relationship without sexual desire are still largely missing, at least the term 'asexual' provides a socially-mandated explanation for the lack of such desire within the relationship, rather than the partner feeling they are sexually unattractive. This demonstrates the interactional negotiation of meaning, or 'definition of the situation' (Thomas and Thomas 1928) that takes place in verbal interchanges as social encounters. It also indicates what Mills (1940) terms a 'common vocabulary of motives' through which actors provide socially acceptable accounts for deviant behaviour. Therefore, for Catherine, contrary to Immy who feared people saw asexuality as a stigmatising attribute, the gaining of an identity allowed her the freedom to practice intimacy according to her desires. The

contrast between Catherine's and Immy's stories highlights the significance of intimate others being open to negotiation, to create a shared definition of the situation, as they were seen to be for the former but were imagined not to be for the latter.

**Freedom 2 (introspective): *asexuality as a social category permits non-sexualness and consequently provides some ontological security***

As we saw in the foreclosure section, awareness of one's self as asexual can lead to feelings of difference from others. However, it could also have the opposite result, whereby one has a 'eureka' moment and the ability to speak comfortably of their desires. This was suggested by Nadine:

*There was this site called Tumblr - this amazing site. And the format is basically you have this dashboard and it just like scrolls information and images past you. And one day I was just scrolling through things and someone had made a series of coming out cards for all different sexualities...so there was like a coming out card for homosexuality, there was a coming out card for bisexuality and there was a coming out card for asexuality. And it was like, 'It's not that I'm broken, it's just that I've never going to look at you and want to take all your clothes off. Please don't try to tell me that I am a prude, or immoral, or going to hell. Because that's not true'. And I was just like, 'Yes, that explains it!'. (Nadine, grey-asexual, 28)*

Importantly, Nadine feels much better about herself after finding out that asexuality is a 'real' orientation. It is okay to be asexual and, however fleetingly, part of an asexual community, who can listen, give advice and validate one's identity. As Mead (1934) noted, our sense of self and awareness of the generalised other always occurs with reference to a certain 'community'. When this community expands, our concept of the other, including what is considered acceptable behaviour, can expand as well. Therefore, Nadine is able to feel part of a community, and, much like Catherine, has the freedom to now seek out the forms of intimacy she desires. As we shall see below, this attitude – and the ontological security it provided – allowed Nadine to engage in negotiations with others to achieve her desired form of intimacy.

**Freedom 3 (negotiated): *an asexual identity facilitates the space to engage in non-traditional practices of intimacy***

Some of our participants found ways to negotiate relationships in such a way as to obtain their desired forms of intimacy while also pleasing their partner(s) outside of a traditional partnered formation. There were three ways in which this could occur, the first of which is suggested by Frances:

*So I just started reading into it and I kind of identified as demisexual first, and then I realized that, actually, you know, I just don't enjoy having sex, so I might as well just describe myself as asexual. And I kind of read a few things on Tumblr...a couple of things by asexual people and there was one in particular that really kind of struck a chord with me that was saying 'no one has the right to define you – it's only you'. And I was like...I've quite often like doubted my own sexuality cause I'm not asexual enough or whatever, cause I do enjoy having sex with people, I just don't want to be touched myself. And I've just read stuff and it all just kind of clicked, and I told my girlfriend and she was, like, 'Cool, fine, whatever!' (Frances, grey-a lesbian, 19)*

Frances describes how she had found a way to get the closeness she wanted by engaging in sex with her partner but avoiding the sex acts that she did not want, namely, having someone touch her. She finds a way of being true to her own desires, which are complex and perhaps fall between traditional categories – even those within the asexual community. This opens up space for discussion and negotiation within the relationship, whereby both Frances and her partner can gain the intimacy they desire. Her passionate right to self-definition leads to a willingness to engage sexually in the ways that she wants; they both are and are not in a sexual relationship. This reminds us of the emotional complexity and ambivalence that often characterise intimate relationships (Craib 1994), but also how such 'messiness' can be resolved into something realistically workable. A similarly pragmatic approach is suggested by Nadine, reflecting on her 'eureka' moment discussed above:

*I've always been interested in things like bondage and sex...actually bondage is where it started. But, because I was never able to like, attach a sexual component to it – like it didn't turn me on. I thought that it was just like a theoretical interest and nothing that I could actually pursue. And then when I found asexuality, I was like, 'Okay – if I remove sex from everything in my life, everything else makes more sense; like, if I pull sex out of it I was capable...I'm very, very much a sadist...And that level of power exchange makes my husband feel very, very uncomfortable. And six months later we*

*were, like, you know, actually we should really try poly, because some of these people are awesome, and he was like I really want to date the girl. (Nadine, grey-asexual, 28)*

In Nadine's case, thinking of oneself as someone who deviates from the dominant cultural script opens up the possibility for other ways of relating. These become the 'experiments in living' spoken of for other non-normative relationships (Weeks et al. 2001). Furthermore, claiming asexuality as an identity enables Nadine to reframe her existing intellectual interest in sadism in a more conventional fetish script. It is also significant that – as noted in research concerning those in a relationship with someone who comes out as trans (Sanger 2010) – coming to think of oneself as having a particular sexual identity can lead to one's partner reconsidering their own desires. In this case, Nadine's identification as asexual and a 'sadist' led her husband into considering both his own attitudes towards bondage as well as polyamorous relationships for the first time.

This embracing of a polyamorous relationship, noted by other researchers on asexuality (Scherrer 2010) can also be found, with a twist, in the story of Freya:

*my three women: the wife, the girlfriend and the mistress – they are all straight women, and somehow I think I need them to be that, or not be in any way sexually interested in me for me to make the leap of actually being able to be really intimate with them...One of the things I enjoy most is playing with my wife's hair...just having her sit on the floor in front of me and run my fingers through her hair; mostly because she enjoys it so much, and she says I just do it so much better than her husband! (Freya, asexual-heteromantic, 24)*

Freya's polyamorous relationship is of a very particular form. Unlike Nadine's, sexual motives are not open for negotiation. This frees up possibilities of finding other ways to practice intimacy, which are more complex and multifaceted. In particular, she maintains forms of friendships with physical intimacy which are seen as non-threatening precisely because of her asexuality. Freya's position of 'second fiddle' (as she put it) for each woman means that a) she is not in danger of facing the 'something more' problem discussed above by Josie and b) is able to engage in her preferred forms of physical and emotional intimacy without too much commitment.



In each of these cases, our participants developed new strategies to practice intimacy: engaging in distinct forms of sex; considering a polyamorous relationship in which the asexual person could indulge their kink and their partner could seek further sexual satisfaction elsewhere; and a form of non-sexual polygamy in which friendships with non-sexual physical intimacy are accepted due to the person's asexuality. As we have discussed, all of these strategies require the partner(s) being willing to engage in forms of negotiation. This can also lead to them reconsidering their own desires. While these stories seem to hint at claims that asexuality involves the 'transformation' of intimate relationships (Carrigan 2012) and therefore is akin to queer politics (Przybolo 2013) we should be aware this is just one outcome among many. Such an attitude also requires the partner(s) to reconsider their own identity. Not all partners will want to do this. This reminds us of how the ability to explore particular forms of asexual identity relies upon relational opportunities, pertaining to the membership of some teams (Goffman 1959) but not others.

**Freedom 4 (Negotiated): *an asexual identity facilitates space to engage in a range or intimate practices within conventional homo- and hetero-romantic relationships***

While some participants developed innovative forms of relationships, others sought to negotiate within the conventional form. There were two ways in which this was possible. The first of these was exemplified by Iris:

*I had found out I was ACE but I was also having anxiety issues so I dropped out of Uni...We started seeing each other again but before we did that, I had to tell him. Because I know what I am - and I just want us to be on the same page here - and he said, 'No that's fine, it's all fine'. [I said] You know what that means though - I still love you to pieces, I just don't give/get. And he said, 'It's fine', and we sort of negotiate stuff and it all seems to work out...There's a bit more talking than there is in other relationships but it works out fine...So it was okay, it's this shape and we'll work it out as we go along and we now have a name for how I am. (Iris, pan-romantic asexual, 20)*

Iris's coming out to her partner meant that their relationship involved significant daily communication concerning what she was, and was not, willing to do sexually. In this sense, Iris is part of the trend for asexual people to engage in sex 'for the good of the relationship' (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014) but who, in doing so, must negotiate with partners concerning

what they are willing to do. In many ways, this could be seen as fulfilling the model of the 'pure relationship' in which, via a 'democratisation of intimacy' the nature of sexuality is part of ongoing discussion (Giddens 1992). However, these negotiations are contingent and dependent on a flexible partner. Furthermore, they are frequently reliant on the woman in the relationship acting as the main instigator of such negotiation, as is also often the case for heterosexual relationships (Jamieson 1998). Nevertheless, 'having a name' for asexuality means that Iris had the ability to engage in these forms of negotiations which otherwise may not have been possible.

While Franke, like Iris, was able to enter negotiations with her partner due to having the term asexuality what we see here is the relief of her partner:

*So he moved here, we got engaged, got married when I was 23. I told him I am asexual right around the time I told him I loved him, and he said, 'oh well that's a relief, I don't really like sex' ...he's a pretty awesome guy...He's like a best friend that I can share a bed with and have other physical contact like holding hands, cuddling, etc. He's the only person I've ever been able to share my personal space with and not felt like my space was being invaded. And I actually do like being touched (by him, no one else) just not in ways most people consider sexual. (Franke, asexual, 26)*

In this case it may be that having a partner who is asexual means that Franke's partner does not need to engage in the standard practices of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1995), including high levels of sexual desire and prowess, leaving him and Franke free to engage in other forms of physical intimacy. This suggests that asexual and sexual people are not necessarily absolute, contrasting types, but can be much blurrier with the potential for similarity, overlap and harmonious compromise.

As we have seen, freedom as a resolution did not always involve the transformation of relationships. Rather, what it did create were contingent negotiations with imagined or real partners concerning the shape of the relationship. In this sense, it required dramaturgical teamwork (Goffman 1959) and identity work (Snow and Anderson 1983). It is also worth noting that freedom here, like most forms, was relational (Bauman 1988). For the asexual person to practice the freedom they wanted, their partner(s) had to adapt their own behaviour, including, perhaps, accepting limitations on their intimate and/or sexual life.

## *Conclusion*

Using Symbolic Interactionist theory, this paper has suggested that asexual identities and intimacies interrelated in different ways to create mobile and differentiated consequences for personal life. The consequences of foreclosure (where asexuality was seen to limit the potential for intimacy) or freedom (where asexuality was seen as given a vocabulary to negotiate what one wants within, or outwith, traditional relationship forms) were developed which, in some cases, created distinct ways of thinking and acting through which actors sought either to remove themselves from intimate life, or to seek out the intimate practices they desired. Contingency on others, real or imagined, was central to participants' perceptions and experiences particularly in relation to the willingness of others to engage in negotiations concerning appropriate practices of intimacy.

As asexuality is a sexual orientation defined by questions of sexual desire and romantic attraction, it was likely that these two factors would have some form of connection. In particular, participants had to not only undergo the process of becoming asexual, but also had to negotiate several factors: the 'sexual assumption'; their own desires; the expectations of others; and the need to determine what practices of intimacy were, and were not, appropriate. While the generalised other was always a significant part of this, resolutions could be sought either introspectively or in negotiation with others.

We would suggest that these arguments suggest the need to keep in mind the need for a 'relational' approach to understanding personal life (Smart 2007). This is especially the case for asexual people who, without dominant scripts of asexual intimacy, can only engage in negotiations to the extent that others are willing. If such negotiations are increasingly open to asexual people, then perhaps the attitude of freedom will become more prominent than that of foreclosure.

## *Notes*

1. For this article, McDonnell conducted the initial data analysis and then, in collaboration with Scott, developed the themes of freedom and foreclosure. This included selecting the illustrative cases. Scott and McDonnell subsequently presented this argument at a departmental seminar. Dawson was then responsible for preparing the initial draft of this article, in collaboration with Scott and McDonnell. We all jointly undertook the revisions to the article.

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